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ABSTRACT

The public receives a large percentage of its information about mental health issues from media sources. Research has shown that the portrayal of occupational roles is often distorted and unrealistic. Cultivation theory predicts that television's version of reality helps influence or "cultivate" viewers' beliefs about the world. This cultivation might influence a person's expectations or behavior during an encounter with these professionals, or even influence viewers' decisions to consult these professionals when in need of service. Research for this paper employed mixed methods to explore how mental health professionals are portrayed on television. Analysis of characters involved a random sample across all genres of programming. Trained coders (n=9) identified 10 out of 1,844 speaking characters as mental health professionals. Descriptive statistics are reported on the characters. A content analysis by type of programming is presented and discussed. Exploratory analysis examining the portrayal of mental health professionals on prime-time television indicates that portrayals can not be classified by tone in a single category; however tone appears to be consistent within certain programming genres. Future survey research is planned. Contains 15 references. (EMK)

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Mental Health Professionals According to Prime-Time:
An Exploratory Analysis

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Mental Health Professionals According to Prime-Time: An Exploratory Analysis

Introduction

In 1964 DeFleur examined the portrayal of a broad range of occupational roles on television. Results indicated that the portrayal of occupational roles was often dramatically distorted and unrealistic. Subsequent studies have focused on the portrayal of specific occupations such as nurses, doctors, teachers, and other professional groups. These studies, too, found that there were often false and unrealistic portrayals on television (Gitlan, 1977; Kalisch & Kalisch, 1984; Swetnam, 1992; Turow, 1989).

Cultivation theory predicts that television's version of reality helps influence, or "cultivate," viewers' beliefs about the world (Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, & Signorielli, 1994). Portrayal of the sleazy lawyer or the MD who is able to cure all ills cultivate beliefs about these professionals. This cultivation might influence a person's expectations or behavior during an encounter with these professionals, or even influence viewers' decisions to consult these professionals when in need of service.

The public receives a large percentage of its information about mental health issues from media sources. The Daniel Yanklovich Group, Inc. (1990) found 87% of survey respondents cited television and news programs as a source of information about chronic mental illness while family and friends were cited by only 51% of the respondents.

At least two experiments have shown a direct link between negative portrayals of mental health professionals and viewers' attitudes toward these practitioners, supporting the Cultivation theory. Domino (1983) administered questionnaires to subjects before and after the release of *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*. Subjects who saw the film demonstrated more negative attitudes toward mental health professionals and mental hospitals/facilities after viewing the film than did control subjects. Schill, Harsch, and Ritter (1990) tested the effects of

the movie *Lovesick* on viewers' attitudes. The movie produced more incorrect beliefs about psychiatry among subjects in the study. After viewing the film, subjects tended to be "more accepting of sexual behavior between analyst and patient and were cynical about the motivation of the mental health professions in prohibiting such behavior" (p. 399).

Sancho-Aldridge and Gunter (1994) conducted a survey to measure viewers' beliefs about the portrayal of psychotherapy in a television program entitled *Shrinks* in the United Kingdom. Results indicated that viewers believed that *Shrinks* gave a responsible portrayal of psychiatry and felt the program served to increase awareness of mental health issues while promoting the idea that it is acceptable to see a psychiatrist. Subjects who were involved in the mental health arena themselves (either as a mental health professional or as a client), however, identified the show as unrealistic and misleading.

Reviews of film content indicate that there has been a great deal of negative material released over the years. Fleming and Manvell's (1985) chronological review of mental health professionals portrayed in films released between 1906 and 1981 identifies many negative examples including Alfred Hitchcock's *Spellbound* (1945) which portrays one psychologist as manipulative and shrewd; another who falls in love with her patient. In *Klute* (1972) Jane Fonda seeks therapy in a state of crisis and is tuned away by the therapist. In *Dressed to Kill* (1980) Michael Caine portrays a mad, depraved, transsexual psychiatrist who seeks violent revenge on women.

Schneider (1977) examined the portrayal of psychiatry in commercial films. This review also identifies many negative portrayals such as the "psychiatrist as villain" in films such as *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1921), and *Nightmare Alley* (1947). Schneider introduces an additional category of psychiatrist portrayals in films: the mental health professional as "wonder-worker" who cures a patient by uncovering a single traumatic event as in *The Three Faces of Eve* (1957). While this category of portrayals is not "negative" toward mental health professionals it could, by virtue of misleading the public, have negative social effects.

Turkat (1977) examined episodes of two comedy series, *I Dream of Jeannie* and *The Bob Newhart Show*. The mental health professionals in these programs were portrayed as ineffectual and as the butt of jokes. Walter (1992) examined the portrayal of psychiatrists in the cartoon

genre and found a consistent tone of silly incompetence over the last fifty years. No content analysis of programming, however, was found in the literature which examines how mental health professionals are portrayed on television across all genres of programming. Such an examination is necessary to better understand what types of beliefs about mental health professionals are cultivated by television. The present research introduces this dimension to help address some important questions for cultivation analysis.

Research Questions

A number of research questions are inspired by evidence from previous studies: (1) are television portrayals of mental health professionals predominantly negative, perhaps causing some viewers in need of psychiatric services to avoid treatment or withhold information from their therapist; or (2) are television portrayals of mental health professionals predominantly positive causing some viewers to enter treatment with unrealistic expectations about the speed or reliability of treatment which thus hinders the long-term therapeutic process; or (3) are television portrayals of mental health professionals balanced and informative, providing viewers with the information needed to make informed decisions about their care?

Methodology

The present research employs mixed methods to explore how mental health professionals are portrayed on television. Identification of mental health professionals in the programming was determined using quantitative methods. The analysis of these characters, however, was executed entirely qualitatively since this is the first content analysis of a random sample over all genres of programming. A much richer exploration can be made qualitatively at this stage rather than trying to select a priori variables and hypotheses based on a small literature from the history of film or isolated portrayals reported from past television shows.

Sample

One week of prime-time programming (8-11 PM) was selected from the fall season of 1996 for the ABC, CBS, Fox, and NBC television networks in the Asheville, NC market. The sample for analysis contained 84 hours of television programming; 107 programs. The four

major broadcast networks constitute approximately a 62% share of all prime-time viewers during this time frame.

Procedure

Nine coders were recruited and trained to code the sample of programming for population size, demographic characteristics, and to identify mental health professionals. Ten percent of the sampling block was given to multiple coders for reliability checks. The agreement among coders in counting and identifying the number of all speaking characters by race and gender in each program was .955 using Pearson's *r*. There was perfect agreement among coders in the identification of mental health professionals portrayed in the reliability sample.

The principal investigators reviewed all programming identified by trained coders which contained portrayals of mental health professionals. The principal investigators organized these portrayals in a data-driven analysis.

Findings

Trained coders identified 10 of 1844 speaking characters to be portrayed as mental health professionals (0.5%). About 0.4% of the U.S. population is employed as a psychologist, psychiatrist or social worker (U.S. Department of Commerce, 1996). Nine of the ten mental health professionals on television were white, one African-American. Four of the practitioners were female and six were male.

Of the 107 programs in the sample, 10 episodes (9.3%) contained at least one mental health professional. Two programs contained more than one mental health professional, and two mental health professionals appeared on more than one episode. One of these characters, Dr. Elizabeth Olivet appeared on two different programs and two different networks (*Law & Order*, NBC; *New York Undercover*, Fox, both Dick Wolf productions). Table ^{one}~~two~~ provides summary information on the mental health professionals portrayed.

INSERT TABLE ONE ABOUT HERE

As illustrated in table two, portrayals of mental health professionals occurred in three distinct genres of television programming: Dramas, News Magazines, and Situation Comedies. The tone of portrayals were consistent within each genre, but varied greatly between genres. Dramas portrayed some very well researched and complex portrayals of mental health professionals and therapeutic situations, but also examples of the "wonder-workers" who show super-human diagnostic skills. News Magazines presented neutral portrayals, allowing mental health professionals to speak in their own words. Situation comedies portrayed mental health professionals as incompetent.

Dramas

Mental health professionals were portrayed on four network dramas: *Law & Order*, *New York Undercover*, *Moloney*, and *Star Trek: The Next Generation*. The portrayal of mental health professionals on these programs was generally positive. There were some portrayals, however, which were unrealistically positive. These unrealistically positive portrayals might give viewers unrealistic expectations in their own therapeutic encounters.

Dr. Elizabeth Olivet (Carolyn McCormick) appeared on two Dick Wolf productions: *Law & Order* (NBC) and *New York Undercover* (Fox). In *Law & Order* she is called in by the District Attorney's office to assess the ability of a murder suspect to give informed consent for a police search. With knowledge that the suspect is claustrophobic an Assistant District Attorney literally cornered the suspect until she gave consent to search. The suspect's attorney moves to suppress the evidence found in the search. Dr. Olivet interviewed the suspect for two minutes on screen. The scene ends with an emotional statement by the suspect. An audio bridge into the next scene has Dr. Olivet reporting her diagnosis of the suspect. "Her anger at what was done to her parents is displaced externally into empathy and internally into depression." Soon thereafter an Assistant District Attorney cuts to the root of the matter, "What about the search?" Dr. Olivet replies, "She's capable of voluntary consent. There's no indication of breaks with reality." Dr. Olivet's analysis is succinct, based on minimal contact, and accurate, as supported by admissions by the suspect later in the program.

In a creative cross-promotion, Dr. Olivet also appears as a psychiatrist on *New York Undercover*. In this program Dr. Olivet serves as a police psychiatrist—"a shrink for cops,"

according to one sergeant who is advising an officer recovering from a traumatic field experience. "She's good. I know," continues the sergeant, in a tone suggesting the sergeant has seen Olivet as a client: a subtle clue to the audience that seeking psychotherapy is OK, and perhaps more widespread than known on the surface.

Nina Marino is the officer in crisis. The scene of the first therapy session begins with Nina in mid-conversation, "I'm sorry I don't. . . I don't have much more to say." The audience is clued that the few moments we see are only a slice toward the end of the session. Dr. Olivet presses Nina and a breakthrough occurs.

"I just feel so ashamed," says Nina.

"Why?" probes Dr. Olivet.

"Because I set high standards for myself."

"And why do you do that?"

"Because. . . ."

"Finish it."

"I was going to say because of my Dad, but I don't know what he has to do with this except that nothing I ever did was ever good enough for him. I was just always trying to please him."

Dr. Olivet interrupts, "Now that's something to look at, but we're going to have to stop for today."

"What?" interjects Nina, incredulously.

"Time's up."

The scene ends powerfully with Nina's frustration and Dr. Olivet reminding Nina that there is another patient waiting, and that ending mid-thought is "part of the process."

A sub-plot of the program includes another officer, Officer Williams, surprised by a visit from Rebecca Stapleton, a social worker from the Bureau of Child Welfare. Officer Williams shoved his son, Gregory, into a door, an act he claims "never happened before." Gregory told a friend, and the tale made it to his teacher who reported the incident. Stapleton is cold and direct. It is clear she's been in the field and is hardened to double-talk. In a counseling session with both parents she presses when the mother says, "I'd like to know the

circumstances (of the shoving)." Stapleton challenges, "You mean under some circumstances it would be OK?"

Stapleton agrees not to take action contingent on six additional sessions of family therapy. The storyline ends with the father and son walking down the street. The father says, "I promise that (shoving you) will never, ever happen again." The son replies, "I'm sorry for the way I acted."

The therapy theme of the program ends, however, with Nina in a group session telling her tale in a montage of dissolves and sentence fragments. Her last line is, "I feel I don't want to be here, but it's a start." The audience is left with the sense Nina's therapy is a complex and long-term process. The overall treatment of mental health professionals by *New York Undercover* is complex and well balanced, with the resolution to the social worker story perhaps a bit simple.

The remaining portrayals of mental health professionals in dramas are extreme examples of wonder-workers. Deanna Troi, the ships counselor on *Star Trek: The Next Generation* appears on two episodes in the sample. In both episodes Counselor Troi has brief encounters with subjects: encounters the audience, too, shares. While the behavior of the subjects has no real significance for the audience, Troi sees the hidden intention and motivation beneath the subjects' manifest actions and words. Therefore, Troi's comments serve as foreshadows, and in both episodes her analysis is confirmed by elements revealed later in the program.

In one episode Counselor Troi is troubled by guests who visit the ship. There is nothing about the guests that appears unusual on the surface. The Captain asks, "Are you worried they're not who they say they are?" Troi replies, "I'm worried they're not *what* they say they are." An incredible observation which is validated when it is revealed the visitors are, in fact, not human, and can turn themselves into grotesque creatures.

In another episode Counselor Troi confronts Captain Picard and virtually accuses him of having unresolved issues from his past which lead to hidden motivation for extending aid to an injured alien (a Borg). "Is there anything you want to talk about?" she asks the Captain early in the program. He denies any ulterior motives, and seems resolute. The Counselor

replies, "I see," a word-play on her ability to see through Picard, which is punctuated by her next line, "Well, if at any point you want to talk more"

It is later revealed to the audience that the captain, indeed, has hidden and troubling motivation for his action. The Captain intends to implant the Borg with a computer virus and return him to the collective to infect the entire species.

While these stories are science fiction, the message to the viewers might be that mental health professionals, in space and at home, can reliably see into people and get to the heart of a matter invisible to the rest of us.

The CBS drama, *Moloney*, is the most extreme example of the wonder-worker type. Moloney is a police psychologist or psychiatrist (his exact title is not given) on the scene of a police shooting. A cop has just shot his partner in the back. The partner is now dead. Moloney counsels the officer responsible for the shooting, Nick, and asks him about the incident. Nick claims it was an accident and describes what happened. The two officers had been in conflict earlier, however, and internal affairs launches an investigation with suspicion that the shooting was intentional, and that Nick is a bad cop.

Moloney's counseling of Nick is exceptional, and the show is very well written. Moloney's advise is believable, professional, and personable. But Moloney does too much. In addition to counseling Nick, Moloney single-handedly investigates the shooting himself and proves that the shooting was, in fact, an accident and that Nick is not a bad cop. He also has time in-between this undertaking to counsel the wife of the deceased cop, to interview a potential witness in a mob trial, and to deal with his daughter's teenage defiance, tasks he all handles marvelously.

News Magazines

The most balanced portrayals of mental health professionals were evident in the network's news magazine programs. Sample episodes of *20/20* and *Primetime Live* both contained interviews with psychologists. *20/20* broadcast a segment examining a new procedure for heroin detoxification. Dr. Bennett Oppenheim, a psychologist who helped open the first facility in America to perform the procedure, gave statements about the success of the procedure. In traditional news magazine format, the procedure was challenged by another

expert, but Oppenheim was quoted again on camera after the challenge to answer the criticism.

Primetime Live explored the difficulties of raising children by giving cameras to a number of families to take home, then analyzing the social dynamic between parents and children from the videotapes. The analysis was done by Dr. Lawrence Cutner, a clinical psychologist. After each home movie sequence Cutner identified the parenting mistakes in the clips and presented alternative options for handling the situations to the correspondent and the audience. It is clear the program intended to portray Cutner as an expert and as an authority. The correspondent identifies Cutner as teaching at Harvard Medical School and as a contributor to *Parenting* magazine. Cutner's tone is calm, his advice direct and his arguments sound. In both of these news magazine programs the mental health professions spoke for themselves and had their statements presented in a context which conveyed competence and professionalism.

Situation Comedies

The portrayals of mental health professionals on situation comedies were all overwhelmingly negative. Four mental health professionals were portrayed on the programs: *Frasier*, *Wings*, and *Ellen*. On *Frasier*, Niles Crane and the title character Frasier Crane, both psychiatrists, were portrayed as neurotic, out-of touch with normal life, and generally incompetent. Frasier runs into a fan of his radio show who is feeling humiliated because he was just treated rudely by a famous person, and Frasier adds insult to injury by also acting rudely and walking away, leaving the man dejected and the audience laughing.

On *Wings*, Antonio, a local cab driver, volunteers to become a counselor for the suicide hotline. He is given no training before staffing the phone, and his incompetence becomes clear early when he can't even figure out how the phones work. The next day when Antonio meets his friends he tells them he got a date while working at the suicide hotline. His friend, Joe, tells him, "All right! That's great, Antonio, but you know what, you want to be a little careful because dating a co-worker can be kind of dicey." Antonio replies, "Oh, no, I wouldn't date a co-worker. That would be inappropriate. I'm dating a caller." The program follows the relationship and ends with the relationship working out successfully.

In the program *Ellen*, the episode begins with Ellen reading to her therapist from her high school journal. After a few incoherent passages Ellen says, "I just don't understand what you could be getting from any of this." The therapist replies, "Let's see. In high school you were a shy and awkward teen. You were overly kind and helpful to compensate for your lack of self-confidence. By constantly trying to please other people you neglected, and continue to neglect, the person who matters most: you. How am I doing?" The audience laughs and Ellen continues to read from her journal.

Ellen is thrilled with her therapist, and it appears that the therapist is the straight-person and Ellen is the butt of the jokes. In fact, Ellen gets a bank loan thanks to her new-found self-confidence from therapy. Ellen says, that Claire, her therapist "is a genius."

In the next scene Ellen and her friend see a woman urinating in a restaurant parking lot in the middle of the city. The urinator turns out to be Ellen's therapist. Ellen rationalizes to her friends, "I'm sure she had a perfectly good reason." A friend replies, "Yea, yea, maybe she was marking her territory to keep other therapists out of the area . . . I always thought the 'p' in psychologist was silent."

Ellen is clearly troubled, and the therapist tells Ellen to be honest and direct. When Ellen tells the therapist what she saw the therapist goes ballistic. Ellen responds with therapy jargon, "I can't be responsible for your reaction." The therapist interjects, "Shut up! . . . You need therapy!" Ellen rejoins sarcastically, "Well, duh."

Conclusions

Exploratory analysis examining the portrayal of mental health professionals on prime-time television indicates that portrayals can not be classified by tone in a single category. Television portrayals of mental health professionals are not uniformly positive, negative, nor neutral. Tone of portrayals do, however, seem to be consistent within certain programming genres. Network news magazines exhibit portrayals of mental health professionals which are relatively objective, allowing the practitioners to speak in their own words, and editing these segments in a context which does not notably slant the portrayal of the professional.

Some dramatic programming gives a great deal of attention to the complexity of mental health issues and the complexities of the therapeutic process, but some dramatic programming

portrays mental health professionals as overly-powerful, perhaps giving viewers unrealistic expectations of the process of psychotherapy. Situation comedies were consistent in their portrayal of mental health professionals as very incompetent and/or unprofessional. This did not appear to be just an artifact of the comedy genre since other characters in the same episodes were not portrayed as negatively.

Suggestions for future research include additional content analysis using a larger sample of programming. Since mental health professionals represent a very small percentage of the population of television characters, a replication with a larger sample will help indicate whether the trends identified in the present research are, in fact, indicative of the news magazine, comedy and dramatic genres. The addition of specific measures such as "tone of portrayal," "professionalism," "competence," and "trustworthiness" assigned to characters, and "realism level," and "success rating" assigned to treatment situations will provide an excellent foundation for social effects analysis.

The addition of a survey component will help test the social effects dimension. Future survey research that includes: (1) viewer attitudes toward mental health professionals, and the therapeutic process; (2) self-reports of television exposure by genre (comedy, drama, news) or by specific programs; and (3) control variables, will allow a test of the social impact of these fantastic portrayals.

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Table 1.
Summary Characteristics of Mental Health Professionals on Television
(One Week Sample, Network Prime-Time, Fall 1996)

Dramas

<u>Program</u>	<u>Character</u>	<u>Title</u>	<u>Sex</u>	<u>Race</u>	<u>Network</u>
Law & Order	Dr. Olivet	psychiatrist	F	W	NBC
Moloney	Dr. Moloney	therapist	M	W	CBS
New York Undercover	Dr. Olivet	psychiatrist	F	W	Fox
	R. Stapleton	social worker	F	B	Fox
Star Trek: Next Generation (1)	Dr. Troi	counselor	F	W	Fox
Star Trek: Next Generation (2)	Dr. Troi	counselor	F	W	Fox

News Magazines

<u>Program</u>	<u>Subject</u>	<u>Title</u>	<u>Sex</u>	<u>Race</u>	<u>Network</u>
20/20	Dr. Oppenheim	psychologist	M	W	ABC
Primetime Live	Dr. Cutner	psychologist	M	W	ABC

Situation Comedies

<u>Program</u>	<u>Character</u>	<u>Title</u>	<u>Sex</u>	<u>Race</u>	<u>Network</u>
Ellen	Claire	therapist	F	W	ABC
Frasier	Dr. F. Crane	psychiatrist	M	W	NBC
	Dr. N. Crane	psychiatrist	M	W	NBC
Wings	Antonio	counselor	M	W	NBC